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Peng Shuai Returns - But Is She Free?

By Jose Garcia-Bonilla and Jessie Lewis

In a previous post, we discussed the events which led to the sports community's use of the hashtag # *WhereIsPengShuai*. To quickly recap, on November 2, 2021, Peng Shuai released a statement on the Chinese social media platform Weibo, which detailed allegations of sexual assault against former Vice-Premier Zhang Gaoli, who was the face of the organizing effort for the recent Beijing Olympics. Immediately following the publication of Peng's statement, the post was removed from the internet, Peng's name was censored across Chinese media outlets and Peng disappeared from the public eye. In response to the uncertainties surrounding Peng's safety and freedom, the Women's Tennis Association ("WTA") suspended all tournaments in China on December 1, 2021.

On February 7, 2022, Peng re-entered the spotlight after interviewing with French media outlet *L'Equipe*. In her interview, Peng surprisingly announced her retirement and tried to explain to *L'Equipe* that her post was actually "*an enormous misunderstanding from the outside world.*" The interview included quotes like "Sexual assault? I never said that anyone made me submit to a sexual assault" and when asked why she deleted the post from Weibo, Peng only offered the response "*because I wanted to.*"

Although *L'Equipe* was permitted to ask Peng Shuai questions beyond those that were pre-submitted to Chinese officials, the interviewer, Marc Ventouillac, was not convinced that Peng was truly free to answer. She may seem outwardly healthy, but the sports community, including the WTA, believes Peng was forced to cover up her allegations by answering *L'Equipe's* questions in a particular way. In fact, Ventouillac found it off-putting that Peng answered his questions without hesitating, as if she knew what she was going to say. In other words, he believed it was scripted.

The interview with *L'Equipe* was organized to show the world that Peng Shuai is doing well, but it seems to have missed the mark. Instead of feeling comforted about her well-being, many were left feeling as concerned as ever about her safety and freedom. Now that the Beijing Olympics have ended, will this interview mark the end of Peng Shuai's story? Or is there more brewing behind closed doors?

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